

475
38
16
copy 1

Military Order



of the

Loyal Legion

of the



United States.



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPER 85.

A Personal Episode of the First
Stoneman Raid.



Military Order of the Boyal Legion

OF THE

United States.



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPERS.

85

A Personal Episode of the First Stoneman Raid.

BY

Companion

FREDERICK W. MITCHELL,

Captain U. S. Volunteers.

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF DECEMBER 6, 1911.

PUBLICATION DIRECTED BY THE LITERARY COMMITTEE UNDER AUTHORITY
OF ORDER OF THE COMMANDERY.

A Personal Episode of the First Stoneman Raid.

FOREWORD.

"Where then, General?"

"God only knows," answered Stoneman. "If you succeed in getting down the Peninsula, you had better continue on, if possible, and report to Gen. Rufus King at Yorktown. It will be a tough proposition at best, and I fear you won't make the trip without some pretty hard fighting."

I was acting as Colonel Davis' aide, 12th Illinois Cavalry, and could not help hearing their conversation as they stood by our camp fire about 3 A. M. on that beautiful May morning in 1863.

Ten minutes later, "boots and saddles" sounded, and then commenced our personal participation in what is known in history as the first Stoneman raid, very successful so far as our immediate forces were concerned, but fatally lacking in the accomplishment of what the commanding general of the Army of the Potomac had planned and expected.

General Lee at Gettysburg, and General Hooker at Chancellorsville, both appear to have laid their plans as if the defeat of the opposing army was a foregone conclusion, giving their splendid cavalry forces other work to do, instead of having them where the fighting was, to be used in their very time of need.

We know now that Hooker fully expected to whip Lee at Chancellorsville and drive his routed columns toward Richmond. So Stoneman was directed to detach his splendidly mounted and equipped flying squadrons, ride around the rebel army, destroying all lines of communication and doing all the damage possible,

and then pursue the demoralized enemy, even to the gates of their capital. We know now that Hooker did *not* win, did not drive back the enemy, and that all the work and destruction by the cavalry counted for naught.

Stoneman reported that his part of the force was completely exhausted by their two days and nights in the saddle. Our regiment and, I presume, Kilpatrick's, were over twice as long without sleep or rest, and, because thereof, haugs this o'er true tale.

Of all regrets of the prison pen,
The greatest is this, "It might have been."

Taken prisoner on the Stoneman raid near Richmond, Va., while acting as aide to my colonel, I had been transferred by my captors to a detachment of Stuart's cavalry, temporarily camped at a little station on the railroad not many miles from the rebel capital. No one appeared to take any notice of me as I seated myself rather disconsolately upon an old stump. How unreal it all seemed! A few days ago I had been in command of a fine body of men, my own master, ready, as I believed, if need be, to do or to die, and with a heart for any fate. We had represented the very successful part of Stoneman's very unsuccessful raid. Our rapid dash through the rebel country had taken the people entirely by surprise, and our own part, as General Stoneman stated later, had been well done.

Day after day, with but little resistance, horses had been captured, bridges, warehouses, and carloads of provisions and clothing had been burned or otherwise destroyed, and the end of our raid seemed almost in sight. But six days and nights in the saddle, with but slight rest or sleep, had exhausted the little command, and those of the men who had not been fortunate enough to capture fresh horses were wearily struggling along on foot, liable at any moment to be captured by the citizen soldiery who were gathering in squads from all sides.

I had been directed to ride back several miles to encourage and hasten up the men, but, going too far and getting away from the main road, found myself suddenly confronted by a hostile party. It was hardly a case for argument as four double-barreled shotguns at full cock and within ten paces were, to me, a perfectly satisfactory reason why I should temporarily, at least, lose all interest in the further prosecution of the war. My later attempts at escape had proved futile, and for the latter twenty-four hours I had given my parole to make no further effort. My captors had been very kind-hearted, and there were conclusive proofs that the country was now fully aroused and greatly enraged, and that, even if I escaped from them, I would undoubtedly be recaptured by men who would not treat me so leniently. Indeed, several times my captors had stood between me and personal violence from other parties that we met. On this, the evening of the fourth day, I had been delivered over to the authorities at their nearest camp, had bade a rather sorrowful good-bye to my whilom guardians, and now asked myself what caused this desperate feeling of mingled homesickness and depression, and why should even a rebel desire to prevent my telegraphing to the folks at home that at least I was alive and well, if not altogether happy. Instead of the letters U. S. A. representing the power and the majesty of our government and our army with its background of the loyal blue, the letters C. S. A., representing all we had learned to condemn and loathe, on *its* background of the hated gray, were everywhere in evidence, on wagons, blankets, canteens, haversacks, while from a staff in front of the tents floated the Stars and Bars instead of dear Old Glory, never so loved and longed for as then. But the camp was the same, and I could almost imagine that full right and power still remained to me to have these troopers fall in and mount and ride, whenever and wherever I might so command.

There were the horses standing at the picket line, the group of men preparing their supper around the little camp fire, the wagons, bags of grain and bales of hay, everything just as for the past two years I had known them and seen them and lived as a part of them. The horses were perhaps more scrubby, the men certainly more lank and more sallow, the wagons and equipments more shabby and dirtier than of yore, but as the evening shadows grew longer and the daylight faded, it was still the same old typical cavalry camp.

Just then a young soldier, about my age and of somewhat slighter build, detached himself from a group near one of their camp fires and, lounging towards me, peered into my face and said with a southern drawl, "Well, I thought my turn would come some day; you appear to be pretty well put up, and I don't know that I can lick you, but you can bank your last greenback I'm going to try mighty hard." He didn't look to be under the influence of liquor, and as I had just learned that whiskey was selling at \$1 a drink, I didn't believe he was, and I simply sat still and looked at him without answering.

"Come," he said impatiently, "take off your coat; I ain't going to be as mean as you were and pitch on you without giving you some show; get up here or I'll punch your face off." A few of his comrades had meanwhile gathered around and were laughing and chaffing him.

"My friend," I said, still without moving, "I was just realizing how disgusted I was with life generally at being a prisoner, and if it will afford you and the other boys any especial satisfaction, I don't know that I object to a little scrap. I think if, as you say, I licked you once, I shall have no trouble to do it again. The whole matter, however, strikes me as rather ridiculous. I have certainly never met you before."

"The hell you say," answered my aggressive rebel friend. "When I was a prisoner at Fredericksburg a year ago and you

were in command of the Provost Guard, because I was too drunk to obey you and march as you ordered, didn't you get down off your horse and give me the cussedest hammering I ever got? Come, get up, if you ain't too much of a coward!"

"Stop that!" I said, as I jumped to my feet, "don't use that word again, or, with the boys to give us fair play, we'll quickly decide that part of the discussion. But I want simply to say to your comrades that neither I nor my regiment had ever seen Fredericksburg at that time, or had hardly heard of the town, nor was I an officer till the following winter. Besides, a Yankee officer in charge of a Provost Guard isn't in the habit of dismounting and fighting with a drunken prisoner."

"Oh, come off, Sam," said a big, good-natured looking sergeant, "you were too drunk that evening to recognize any one. You've often told how the Yankees who got hold of you first had a lot of liquor with them and gave you all you could drink. You can't fight this man anyhow. He's our prisoner, and you'd get all of us in a nice scrape."

"I know I was awful drunk, but this Yank does certainly look like the one who gave me my licking. If he says he wasn't there, why I reckon he knows. He seems willing to fight, fast enough, so it wouldn't be fair to call him a coward again," and Sam permitted himself to be led away.

And to this day I have remained in ignorance who the other fellow was who looked like me, or for whose sake I had been so nearly sacrificed upon the altar of vicarious atonement.

Late on the following afternoon I was taken by a small squad to a camp about twenty miles south of Fredericksburg, and perhaps twice that distance north of Richmond. I had been cut off from all communication with the main army for over a week, though for the previous few days stragglers and old family servants from the rebel army had reported to my captors that a tremendous battle had been fought, and though the loss

had been severe on both sides, the Yankees had been almost annihilated and General Hooker killed. As we approached Bowling Green we saw a very large crowd coming toward us down the railroad, which proved to consist of over twenty-five hundred Union prisoners, escorted by a hundred or so rebels, the sad results to us of the battle of Chancellorsville. I think at that time I was the only cavalry officer present, and as our detachment had achieved so pronounced a success, while the main army had met such a great reverse, when the boys saw my yellow shoulder straps, some very hearty cheers were given.

We were corralled in a large field, nearly three thousand veteran soldiers, and were in excellent physical condition, just enough chagrined at defeat and angry at our probable sojourn in rebel prisons to do or dare any hazard that promised even a shadow of success. Richmond had been drained of almost every available soldier for the great conflict just closed, and one could safely calculate that hardly a corporal's guard of veterans remained in their city. Their entire army was twenty miles to the north, seemingly unconcerned as to what was between them and their capital, while almost their entire rolling stock was crowded with their sick and wounded. We were composed, in many instances, of almost entire companies, with nearly a full complement of officers and non-commissioned officers. As the percentage of officers was indeed very great, within ten minutes the entire three thousand soldiers could have been as completely organized as if advancing to battle from a camp of our own, to overcome not over a hundred and fifty of the rebel guard. One of the first things which attracted our attention, within about twenty-five rods of the camp, had been a pile of captured muskets as big and broad as an immense barn—thousands upon thousands; many in perfect condition. To several of the officers, none of whom I had of course ever seen, I suggested that the word be passed at once to organize small

squads who should dash simultaneously upon each guard, and even though some of us were killed in the struggle, the guards would be overwhelmed by sheer brute strength. Then a rush for that unguarded pile! Companions, do you realize what that would have meant? Three thousand veterans, with muskets and ammunition unlimited, fighting mad and determined, the wires down, the tracks torn up between their army and their capital, a train ready with steam up, and but one short hour's ride from Richmond! Our cavalry a few days before had done their work very effectually and for many miles the track had since been only temporarily relaid. A small detail, after we had passed, could have again destroyed it and prevented any immediate pursuit. Couriers despatched at once to work their way to the Union lines would have borne the startling message that Richmond was being occupied by thousands of armed Union soldiers, who trusted to their comrades of the grand old Army of the Potomac to prevent any large force from being detached from the main rebel army to retake the city. Do you say that enough defense could have been made by their home guards until the rebel army could have overtaken us? Not so; that train would have steamed quietly past all fortifications, and into the heart of the city, as it did a few hours later, and as conquerors, even if temporary ones, we could have swung Old Glory to the breeze and held Jeff. Davis and his Cabinet prisoners. Would any of those who listen to me not have taken such chances, though he knew his life was to have been the forfeit? To my dying day I shall never cease to regret that we were not given one brief moment more to have at least made the attempt. What might not have been accomplished! Three thousand desperate, armed, organized soldiers inside the rebel capital, without a word of warning to the foe—for that we could have gotten in is as sure as fate. Would we not have made history for a while? We

might not have ended the war itself one day sooner; but the doors of Libby Prison would have been torn open and the poor prisoners from within and from Belle Isle been made free, and would have proven most valuable recruits. Surely such things to a soldier are worth trying for, and if need be, dying for.

But the supreme moment passed. Almost before a dozen words had been spoken the rebels in command sufficiently realized the situation to order the guards to close in upon us and compel us to embark at once on the waiting train. Before the sun had set, we were all prisoners in Richmond, and the story of starvation and death had commenced.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 013 702 001 4